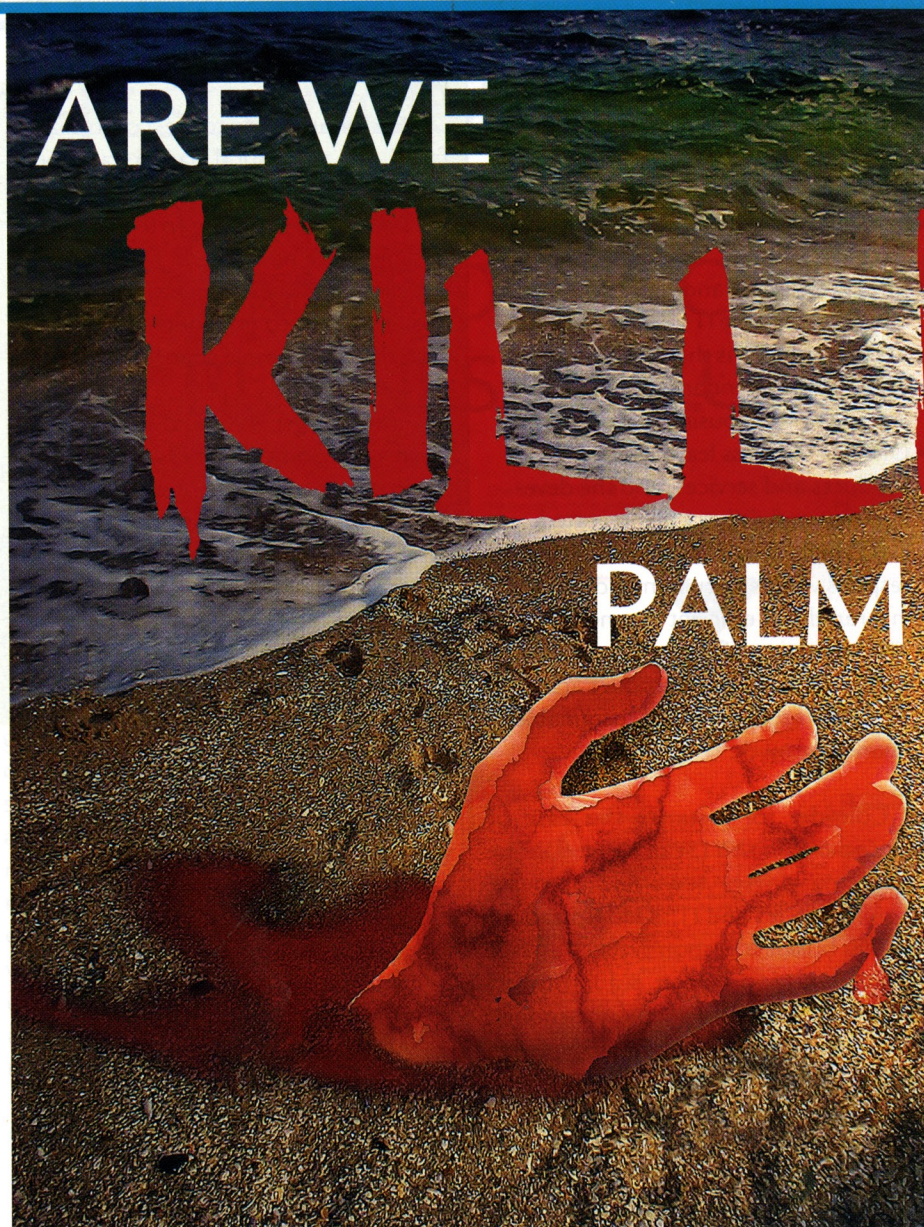




ARE WE KILLING PALM BEACH?

The two most abused words in our tourism in Aruba are in my opinion Sustainable tourism and Branding. For the same reason I have not attended any seminar on the above mentioned subjects in the last few years because what use is there for some tourism guru to preach on these subjects while every thing around us seems to hint to the contrary. As a nation we need to decide what kind of island we want Aruba to be. Based on our decision, we must make a plan and follow it step by step until we reach our goals. In these planning process, there are a few basics that I can think every logic thinking citizen understands and that is particularly looking at the high-rise Palm Beach area in the analysis of: "how much more people can these beaches handle before they

really become very unpleasant? ...and when will our (past) visitors start looking for other beaches that are more pleasant in Cuba, the Dominican republic or Grand Cayman, just to mention a few competing destinations? The high-rise sector currently accommodates about 4500 rooms and with the extension of Riu, Westin, Divi Phoenix, Acqua Condos and Palm Beach Plaza we should add another 1000 units to this area not counting some of the smaller condo projects that have been projected behind the Hyatt Laundry or a Ritz or Fairmont.

In this step by step planning process I find logic that when a new resort does expand with let's say 300 units that an equal amount of parking is created. True or false? Not in Aruba! I can also imagine that when there is

limited beach front that we do not create new resorts in the back row so those new owners or guests have to ask themselves: "Where's the beach"? True or false? Not to worry says the Aruba Government. We have space so let's build a few more hotels and condo hotels and let's worry about the parking later and the beach is not our problem. Funny enough I came around a publication from the Chamber of Commerce titled "A view of Tourism in the next decade" by a well known Aruban and one of the very interesting aspects of his article which I hope the Chamber of Commerce will repeat relates to our Product Aruba. The author makes it a point to distinguish 4 factors that define the appeal of Aruba which are called Unique Selling Points (USP):

- 1 Friendly and multilingual people
- 2 Beautiful beaches
- 3 Good weather
4. Good hotels, restaurants, shops and infrastructure.

These four USP's form a delicate balance and combined they represent what the customer sees and wants in the Product Aruba as best illustrated by the following chart:

PEOPLE	BEACHES
WEATHER	INFRA-STRUCTURE

The moment any of these 4 USP's is lost or deteriorated we have a less appealing product, reduced prices and or fewer customers. For example, if people become unfriendly or monolingual our product will look this:

	BEACHES
WEATHER	INFRA-STRUCTURE

If in addition the beaches become overcrowded or polluted we may look like this:

WEATHER	INFRA-STRUCTURE
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I quote the author: "It is obvious very important that we maintain and preserve our product Aruba. We cannot afford to take a slice out of our pie. If we do, we will no longer have a complete and desirable product and our customers will go elsewhere. Last but not least, our author from the Chamber article gives some sound advice what Aruba should be doing:

- 1 We must ensure that our people remain friendly by enabling them to make a good living with the least possible conflict and pressure from the unavoidable influx of immigrants.
- 2 We must ensure that our beaches do not become overcrowded and polluted by monitoring and enacting the appropriate legislation.
- 3 We must maintain and improve the quality of our hotels by not overbuilding and by attracting the right people to work in them and

manage them.

- 4 We must pray and thank the Good Lord that our weather is great and realize that this is the only thing over which we have no control.

The reader may wonder who the author is and when this article for the Chamber was written and the author, Dear Reader was no one less than **Raymond Maduro** and the Chamber Issue, believe it or not, was **July of 1994**. For thirteen years different Governments in Aruba have ignored what should have been obvious and I am afraid we will pay the price for putting sustainable tourism in the closet. Benchmarking the USP's I detect:

- 1 That less Arubans are entering the hospitality labor force and less service staff is bilingual and friendly.

PEOPLE

- 2 That although we keep winning awards for our beaches, among them Palm Beach, I wonder how long that will continue to happen. Piers, and an unproportional amount of rooms are added to a beach that has not grown and motorized water sports has polluted some areas where to be honest I would not swim.

BEACHES

- 3 That a chaotic parking situation has developed which has totally destroyed the upscale image of the Palm Beach area. There are more hotels and restaurants but the area does not reflect the quality that accompanies units that should sell at \$600 per night or more as part of the branding process. Moreover, the malls that are mushrooming at Palm Beach are killing downtown shopping but once we have developed Palm Beach completely it will no doubt be the turn of developing Eagle Beach's beachfront until we do look like Miami Beach although I am sure that was not part of Juancho irausquin's vision when Aruba inaugurated the Aruba Caribbean Hotel in 1960.

INFRA-STRUCTURE

- 4 That we cannot make the claim being outside the hurricane belt as

recent experience has shown we are on the edge of the hurricane belt.

WEATHER. Weather is indeed not within our control.

Based on the above we may ask ourselves the following questions:

- Who are we doing this for?
- Was this development necessary?
- What happened to Sam Cole's report "A Framework for Sustainable Tourism in Aruba"?
- What happened with the different impact studies that all suggested moderate growth?
- How will we brand this new development when Inherent to any branding process is product and service consistency?
- Are we not listening to what our repeat customers are saying?
- What's next? What will Aruba be like 13 years from now in the Year 2020? Considering we largely neglected our Product the past 13 years does not give much perspective for the next 13 years. Unless some vision is translated into action we will be left with one USP which is

WEATHER

I have no answer for the above posed questions and at the next sustainable tourism or branding seminar I will be saving my seat for a Member of Parliament or Minister because we all seem to read essays like Raymond's, reports like Sam Cole's but do they? And if they did why are we killing Palm Beach and the goose that lays the golden eggs?

**Jan van Nes is currently General Manager of the Playa Linda Resort and President of the Aruba Time Share Association. A graduate of the Hogere Hotelschool in Maastricht (Netherlands) and the University of Aruba's Faculty of Law he served as Managing Director for the Aruba Tourism Authority from 1995 to 2000. Prior to that assignment he worked for Holiday Inn International between 1976 and 1986 in Aruba, Lagos (Nigeria), Acapulco (Mexico) and San Jose (Costa Rica). Between 1986 and 1991 Jan was General Manager of Aruba Beach Club and Casa del Mar.*